

Administration of Barack H. Obama, 2010

Remarks at a Reception Celebrating National Mentoring Month

January 20, 2010

Thank you. Thank you, everybody. Please have a seat. Thank you, Anthony, for that outstanding introduction. And thank you, Michelle Obama, also known around here as FLOTUS—[*laughter*]*—*which stands for First Lady of the United States; I'm POTUS. [*Laughter*]

Good afternoon, everybody, and welcome. I'm glad you all could join us today as we mark National Mentoring Month here at the White House. And as I said, Anthony did a wonderful job introducing me. I'm told that with the guidance of his mentor, Ben De Leon—where's Ben? There's Ben, right there. Anthony, I hear you're working hard, doing great in school. And so we are very proud of you, and we expect you to keep up the good work. And, Ben, thank you for your extraordinary service.

I do want to thank Michelle for launching our White House mentoring program. This is one of those that I can't take full credit for. She has shown extraordinary leadership on this issue in our administration.

Now, we've got several Members of Congress here: Representatives Susan Davis, Gwen Moore, and Mike Rogers. Why don't you guys just stand up so everybody can see you? They've done terrific work promoting mentoring. Thanks to Acting CEO Nicky Goren, as well as John Kelly and Kristin McSwain, from the Corporation of National and Community Service, and to the members of our Federal Mentoring Council for all their great work. Please give them a big round of applause.

And I want to recognize all the mentors who are here, including the people who are up on stage with their mentees, for their encouragement, their inspiration, the example they're providing to young people all across this country.

And finally, I want to recognize the outstanding young men who are here today who are joining our White House mentoring program. It's going to be a program that matches them up with caring adults from our staff here at the White House. And I had a chance to meet them earlier. They're wonderful young men, although one of them started talking trash about basketball already. [*Laughter*] I mean, it didn't take but 5 minutes before he was explaining how he was going to rain down jumpers on me. [*Laughter*]

Now, to all those young men, you were chosen because of the promise that you've shown, because of your willingness to work, your eagerness to learn, your determination to succeed. And all of you deserve enormous credit for that. Now, it's not easy being a young person these days. Fewer young people are growing up in homes with two parents. I'm one of those people who didn't grow up with two parents in a household. Parents are working longer hours, and they've got less time to spend with their kids. And many young people don't have the advantage of living in those tight-knit neighborhoods that many of us who are older grew up in, where people looked out for each other and for each other's children.

We've also seen a rise of a popular culture that doesn't exactly celebrate diligence and self-discipline, but instead, sends a message that you can be rich and famous without doing any work, that your ticket to success is only through rapping or basketball or being a reality TV star. And many young people don't have anyone in their lives to counteract that message, to tell

them that gratification that comes instantaneously usually disappears just as quickly and that real success in life comes from commitment and persistence, effort, hard work.

I know something about the impact these factors can have in the life of a child. And as I mentioned earlier, my father left my family when I was 2 years old. I was raised by a single mom who struggled at times to provide for me and my sister. And while I was lucky to have loving grandparents who poured everything they had into helping my mother take care of us, I still felt the weight of my father's absence throughout my childhood.

So I wasn't always focused in school the way I should have been. I did some things I'm not proud of. I got in more trouble than I should have. Without a bunch of second chances and a whole lot of luck, my life could have taken easily a turn for the worse.

But many kids today aren't as lucky. They've got a much smaller margin for error. A generation or two ago, if you didn't finish school or if you only had a high school diploma, you could still make a pretty decent living. That's usually not the case today. More than ever, success in life depends on success in school. And young people who start down the wrong path and don't have anybody to steer them straight aren't just consigning themselves to a life of financial hardship; they're consigning all of us to an economy that's less competitive and a nation that doesn't fulfill its promise.

That's why mentoring's so important. We know the difference a responsible, caring adult can make in a child's life: buck them up when they're discouraged; provide tough love when they veer off track; being that person in their lives who doesn't want to let them down and that they don't want to let down; and refusing to give up on them, even when they want to give up on themselves.

Now, studies have shown that young people in mentoring relationships get better grades in school, they're less likely to drink, they're less likely to do drugs. And you ask any successful person how they got to where they are today, chances are they'll tell you about a mentor they had somewhere along the way.

The great poet and author Maya Angelou didn't discover poetry until her mentor took her to the tiny library at her school and challenged her to read every book in the room. Cofounder and CEO of Apple Steve Jobs was an incorrigible troublemaker until his fourth grade teacher took him under her wing and convinced him to focus on math instead of mischief. That turned out pretty well. Ray Charles first discovered his gift for music when, at the age of 3, his next-door neighbor taught him how to play the piano. And it was the enthusiasm of her mentor, Dr. Elizabeth Blackburn, that drew Carol Greider to the groundbreaking work in genetics that would win both of them the Nobel Prize for medicine.

So there's no doubt about the value of mentoring. And there's no doubt about the tremendous need for mentors in this country, with at least 15 million young people in need of a mentor. What we need now is for committed adults to step forward and help us meet that need.

Now, I understand times are tough, and I know people are busy. And so sometimes people think, well, I'd like to do it, but I'm not sure I can make the commitment. Here's the thing people need to understand: It doesn't take much to make a big difference. A couple of hours a week shooting hoops, helping with homework, talking about what's going on in their lives can make a big, lasting impact in the life of a young person.

And as the folks up here on stage will tell you, the mentor usually gets as much or more out of it than the mentee. So I'm pleased that nonprofit organizations like Big Brothers Big Sisters are stepping up, expanding their efforts to connect children of deployed service members to mentors, who are often veterans themselves.

Corporations are stepping up as well. Viacom, for example, is working with a national nonprofit called MENTOR to provide flextime to employees who sign up to be mentors and to produce educational materials for mentoring organizations across the country.

Government's doing its part too, launching the serve.gov/mentor web site to help people find mentoring opportunities and expanding mentoring efforts in Native American communities and in rural areas, working with the Federal Mentoring Council to ensure that our initiatives and investments are coordinated, effective, and focused on those most in need.

But here's the thing—and I'm talking specifically to the young people who are here today: In the end, we can start all kinds of mentoring programs and give you guys all the mentors in the world, but it won't make much of a difference unless you do your parts as well. That's the thing about mentoring; it's a two-way street.

So we need you engaged here. We need you to open up. As Michelle said, you've got to ask questions; you've got to ask for help when you need it. I do that every day. Michelle does that every day. It's not a sign of weakness to look for help, to try to answer questions that you don't know the answers to; it's a sign of strength when you do that. It shows that you have the courage to admit when you're unsure of yourself and the willingness to learn and grow and become a better person.

Now, if young people like you are willing to do this, and if compassionate, committed adults are willing to step up, then think about the incredible impact that we can have. Think about the potential that we will discover and the talent that we will nurture and the lives that we can turn around and the effect that we can have on our schools and our communities and the future of this country.

Now, that's the power of mentoring. That's the purpose of what all of you are doing across America. And today I thank you for your work, and I look forward to working with all of you in the months and years ahead. And I'm especially looking forward to seeing all the young men who are here as they spend time in the White House over the next several months.

So thank you very much, everybody.

NOTE: The President spoke at 4:07 p.m. in the East Room at the White House. In his remarks, he referred to his sister, Maya Soetoro-Ng. The transcript released by the Office of the Press Secretary also included the remarks of the First Lady; and Big Brothers Big Sisters mentee Anthony Saldana, who introduced the President.

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Names: Angelou, Maya; Blackburn, Elizabeth H.; Davis, Susan A.; De Leon, Ben; Goren, Nicola O.; Greider, Carol W.; Jobs, Steve; Kelly, John; McSwain, Kristin B.; Moore, Gwendolynne S. "Gwen"; Obama, Michelle; Rogers, Mike; Saldana, Anthony; Soetoro-Ng, Maya.

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